

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 309 840

PS 018 098

AUTHOR Cairns, Beverley D.
TITLE Emancipation, Abdication, and Running Away: A Longitudinal Perspective.
SPONS AGENCY Grant (W.T.) Foundation, New York, N.Y.; Spencer Foundation, Chicago, Ill.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Kansas City, MO, April 27-31, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Adolescents; *Children; Court Litigation; Family Problems; *Foster Children; Longitudinal Studies; Parent Responsibility; *Runaways; Sex Differences
IDENTIFIERS *North Carolina; *Statutory Emancipation

ABSTRACT

The paper reports the results of preliminary analyses of longitudinal data on legally and functionally emancipated children in North Carolina. In North Carolina, children legally achieve emancipation through judicial order, by joining the military, or through marriage. Functionally emancipated children include minor children who live outside the family. The discussion describes characteristics of the sample of 695 children, who were grouped in two cohorts. One cohort began to be tracked when children were in the fourth grade and the other when the children were in the seventh grade. Four categories of functional emancipation are identified; these are based primarily on the living arrangements that subjects formed, outside their original families: with a boyfriend or girlfriend, with a same-age friend, with foster parents or in county homes, or with another relative. About 12 percent of subjects were emancipated in one form or another before they were 18 years old. Findings indicated that these children were less prepared for living on their own than were children who remained at home. In the seventh grade, emancipated girls in particular differed from their peers in socioeconomic status, race, and aggressive behaviors. Excerpts from interviews characterize youth pressured to, or wanting to, leave home, and chaotic family conditions reflecting abdication, rejection, and longing. Descriptive data on runaways is briefly discussed.

(RH)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

X This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
DER position or policy.

Emancipation, Abdication, and Running Away:
A Longitudinal Perspective^{1,2}

Beverley D. Cairns

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Children who are emancipated by judicial order become independent of their parents, and they assume adult responsibility for their own personal and financial affairs. Parents, in turn, no longer have legal or financial responsibility for their emancipated children. The minimum age for judicial emancipation differs across states; for example, in North Carolina, emancipation by judicial order is limited to children 16-17 years of age, while in California children 14-17 years old may qualify. Questions have been raised recently on whether emancipation is in the best interest of the child, or whether adults employ the statute to abdicate parental responsibilities [see Willemsen (1989), Sanger (1989), and Friedrich-Cofer (1989)].

Tied to the issue of statutory emancipation is "functional emancipation," where without the benefit of legal maneuvering minors live outside the family. This may occur by running away and staying away from the home (i.e., moving in with a boyfriend, girlfriend, or another family). The incidence and causes of such legal and extralegal arrangements have rarely been studied, although it appears to be a matter of increasing significance in the 1980s in the U.S. The matter first arose in our work when we discovered that a significant proportion of the adolescent subjects did not live with their families, for one reason or another. In addition, another large proportion had run away from home, or had given it a great deal about thought. Since our work is longitudinal, we have been able to focus on the nature of those children and families who sought emancipation in one form or another. I will report the results of some preliminary analyses today.

Insert Table 1 here on CLS description

Table 1 describes our basic longitudinal sample. We have been tracking 695 subjects over the past 8 years (e.g., Cairns & Cairns, 1986; Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariépy, 1988). One of the cohorts began in the 4th grade, and the other in the 7th grade. We obtained a group that was representative of the region in terms of racial and socioeconomic factors, and whole schools were sampled.

The children in the younger cohort now average 17 years, and are in the 11th grade. Those in the older cohort now average 19 years, and they graduated from high school in June, if they were still in school and on grade.

¹ Read at the 1989 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (April, Kansas City) in the Conversation Hour entitled: "Parental Abdication: In Search of a Policy" (E. Willemsen, chair).

² The author thanks Holly J. Neckerman, Scott D. Gest, Tamara R. Flinchum, and Robert B. Cairns for their assistance. This research was supported by funds from the Spencer Foundation and the Grant Foundation.

ED309840

PS 018098

We have seen these subjects annually, and last year, we interviewed 98% of the original sample.

Now let's see how many of these young people were emancipated. According to North Carolina law, statutory emancipation can occur for minors in three ways: by judicial order, by joining the military, or by marriage. Table 2 shows that none of our group achieved emancipation by judicial order or by joining the military. Therefore marriage was the route for statutory emancipation in this group. But you'll note it was an option exercised only by girls. Table 2 shows that about 4% of the girls and none of the boys got married before age 18.

Insert Table 2 here on Statutory and Emancipation

There is another issue here for our adolescent subjects and their families; namely, that of functional emancipation. This occurs when minors have removed themselves--or have been removed--from their original family setting. In some cases, removal was not so much emancipation, as it was parental abdication.

Insert Table 2B here on Functional Emancipation

In Table 2, we identified four categories of functional emancipation, based primarily upon the living arrangements that these people formed outside their original families. This first group consists of those who move in with a boyfriend or girlfriend. A smaller group live alone, or with a same-age friend and try to make it on their own. A few are placed in foster homes, or in county homes for children. And the largest group move in with another relative, such as a grandparent, an aunt or uncle, or a brother or sister. Included in this last group are kids who leave the custodial parent to live with the other parent, or a step-parent. All in all, about 12% of the subjects in our sample were emancipated in one form or another before 18 years of age.

The question is whether the emancipated kids were better prepared for living on their own--were more mature and responsible than their peers? If anything, our findings strongly indicate that they were less prepared. Follow-up results bear this out. Table 3 shows that over half of the "emancipated" girls left school before completing the 11th grade, and nearly half of the boys left school early. The differences from baserate were highly reliable. If they are employed, they hold menial, "entry-level" jobs. Virtually all of them indicate major financial problems. For those who married, approximately 1/3 have already separated.

Insert Table 3 Here with Means on Dropout

We wondered whether the problems of adjustment arose because of the abdication/emancipation, or whether serious problems were already present in the child's behavior prior to changing families. We compared school and social adjustment when all kids were in the 7th grade and prior to leaving their families. The logistic regression results indicate that "emancipated" and "nonemancipated" boys differed in the 7th grade, but the differences were

slight. There was a modest elevation of teacher ratings of aggression in to-be emancipated boys, but that was all.

Greater differences were found in the girls, and the findings were in the same direction as the boys. As a group, emancipated girls tended to be in the lower half of the socioeconomic classification, they tended to be white rather than black, and they were more aggressive than other subjects in the 7th grade. The last effect tells the same story as the boys' data. In any case, these girls seemed to be no better prepared for independence than their peers. In terms of aggressive behaviors, they were clearly less prepared.

To clarify the kinds of young people who feel pressured to or want to leave home before 18 years of age, here are two examples, both girls.

Maryanne: You know, my mom, she's real sick--she's alcoholic--and I guess after you put up with it for about 5 or 6 years, you just, you know it drags you down and I moved in with my dad now. Its---he got married awhile back, remarried, so I'm with him now and I like it a lot better.

Interviewer: Is your mom doing OK?

Maryanne: Yeah. I went up there this past week. She's doing a little bit better. It's just you know, something that won't go away, all at once.

Listen to the second girl, Jane, for a moment:

Interviewer: How much do your parents care who your friends are?

Jane: Um, well, me and my mom don't really get along. I moved back home for about two weeks. And mama told me she didn't want me there. And when she told me that I just, I left again. I mean, it's so hard. I mean, it hurts so bad when your mama tells you she doesn't want you there. I mean, your own mama. And so when she told me that I couldn't take it. I couldn't stay there. See, deep down inside I'd say she cares. She just don't show it.

For yet another girl, Becky, the changes over the seven years were more chaotic. Her sense of family and her role in it reflects a combination of abdication, rejection, and longing. Below are some interview selected excerpts on what Becky said about her living circumstances each year over a seven year period:

4th Grade (1982)

Interviewer: Who lives at your house?

Becky: I'm living at the County Home right now.

Interviewer: If you had three wishes, what would you wishd for?

Becky: Wishes? I wish that maybe if my mother would come back and I'd know where she is, then maybe I could go back home with her, 'cause I want to go back home and live with her.

5th Grade (1983)

Interviewer: Who lives at your house?

Becky: I live at the County Home.

Interviewer: If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?
 Becky: I wish to live with my mama and be sixteen so I could drive a car.

6th Grade (1984)

Interviewer: Who lives at your house?
 Becky: It's me and my sister and we live with Janice and Roger Cooper. They have one son, John. He's seven. This is my first year at this school [Christian Day School] which I hate. I can't put up with it much longer because the rules here are entirely different.
 Interviewer: Has anyone done anything nice for you recently?
 Becky: Yes. My mother. She's trying to get me home, and I'm going home to her this summer.
 Interviewer: Where is that?
 Becky: Goldsboro.

7th Grade (1985)

Interviewer: Who lives at your house?
 Becky: Just me and my sister live with my mother and my little sister lives with her father and my stepmother lives with her husband which is one of my stepfathers...and..uh...anyway.
 Interviewer: How long have you been at this school?
 Becky: I've been here [Southeast Middle School] 6 weeks. Before that, I was at Narrow Gap for two months and last year I was at the Christian Day School.

8th Grade (1986)

Interviewer: Who lives at your house?
 Becky: I have one sister and one brother. Well, I really have two sisters, but only one lives with me. And my little sister, Irene, I really don't see her 'cause she lives with her father, and her father chooses to disown me as her sister. She's 12. And there's my little brother Rod. He's six. Right now it's me, and my mother, my stepfather, my sister, and my little brother, Rod.
 Interviewer: If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?
 Becky: I wish I could go to school in Goldsboro. Most of my friends are there and I like the teachers there. Yeah, I went part of last year to this same school. I wish for a nicer home and that my mother and stepfather would stop fighting.

9th Grade (1987)

Interviewer: Who lives at your house?
 Becky: At my house right now there is my, my sister, my little brother, my mother, stepfather, and my little sister Irene may come and live with us.
 Interviewer: If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?
 Becky: I don't need to wish for changing schools 'cause I'm already gonna' do that. My mother's even talked to the school board, and they said I couldn't transfer this year, but I could next year. I wish I was eighteen and my boyfriend was eighteen so we could get married and I'd be half out of school and he could get the job he wants 'cause I don't want to be poor.

10th Grade (1988)

- Interviewer: Who lives at your house?
Becky: It's me, my grandma, and granny who owns this house, and isn't really our granny at all. We just look after granny so she won't have to go to a home. I've been livin' here about 5 months, and before that down on Caldwell Street, still with my grandma.
- Interviewer: Do you see your mother much?
Becky: No. I call her but she's never answering the phone, or she's not at home. Every time I see her, she argues. She starts an argument with me about something she don't even know she's talking about. I wish my mother and I could get along.
- Interviewer: Why did you drop out of school?
Becky: I was going over to Northern. I want to be a beautician and you don't need it for that, but I just got bored with it. The classes I had to take were boring to me. There were nothing I was interested in.
- Interviewer: Have you considered going back to school?
Becky: Not to regular school. Maybe night school--over in Goldsboro. I want to get a job. Maybe at Zaire's 'cause they're open 24 hours, or at Food Lion.

Although both Maryanne and Becky may be considered to be the victims of parental abdication, they differed significantly in the extent to which other persons/parents were willing to assist them in their lives. The circumstances available to them when they left the original family setting provided direction for the trajectory for further development.

How are they and the other functionally emancipated adolescents in our sample making it? In a word, poorly. Few have completed high school, and most are living in dismal economic and social conditions. There are some exceptions, of course, but the overall picture is bleak for the present and the future. The jobs they hold are transitory or menial. They make near-minimum wage. But they can get credit cards and loans, if they can find someone older than 18 years old to co-sign. Getting into debt and losing a job is a double whammy for these young people. It's even worse for those subjects who went into debt for a car that they promptly wrecked.

The more general problem is that society has encouraged the appearance of independence at a young age, without providing guidance to young people on how to achieve real autonomy. They get into debts and relationships for which they are ill-prepared. For example, we find that adolescents in our general sample who are in high school work an average of 20 hours per week. A substantial proportion--15%--work a full 40 hours per week while attending high school. This sets the stage for problems when they are still living at home. For kids who are already on their own, the difficulties are multiplied in impact and in number. They are locked out of educational opportunities and locked into the underclass. One problem with the extension of the emancipation laws downward to age 14--as is the case in some states, including the largest one, California--is that promotes the legal abandonment of children. Abandonment occurs in multiple forms already, without judicial approval.

Up to this point, I've focussed on the 11%-15% of the adolescents in our longitudinal sample who, as minors, became independent of the family setting

in which we originally found them. In the course of this longitudinal work, we were struck by the larger number of subjects who talked about wanting to be on their own, and/or took steps toward it. Some of them ran away; namely, left home without permission--and stayed at least overnight, or longer.

Insert Table 4 Here on Runaway and Ideation

Table 4 shows that 22% of the subjects in the sample ran away from home. Boys rarely stayed away for more than a week, but girls often remained for an extended period or permanently. Equally surprising to us was the high proportion who said they "thought a lot" about running away, and had made plans to do so. When ideation is added to action, most of our sample indicate that they want to get away, regardless of parental consent. Over half of the girls (53%) and boys (62%) have, or seriously contemplate, running away before they are 18 years old! About twice as many boys think about as running away as do it, while the proportion of girls who act is about the same as those who have thought seriously about it. When they leave, boys stay away shorter periods than girls. In general, boys seem less willing to take responsibility for themselves and their actions.

Our results on runaways are generally in line with previous analyses, including the studies of the Colorado group (Brennan, Huizinga, and Elliott, 1978). The exception is that our incidence rate is higher. Whether this difference reflects variation due to decade--1970s vs. 1980s--or to region--Rocky Mountains vs. Southeast--remains to be determined.

✦ I'll stop here because I want to hear what others have to say about the nature of emancipation, parental abdication, and contemporary society.

References

- Brennan, T., Huizinga, D., & Elliott, D. S. (1978). The social psychology of runaways. Lexington: MA: D. C. Heath.
- Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1986) The developmental-interactional view of social behavior: Four issues of adolescent aggression. In D. Olweus, J. Block, & M. Radke-Yarrow (Eds.), Development of antisocial and prosocial behavior: Research, theories, and issues (pp. 315-342). New York: Academic.
- Cairns, R. B., Cairns, B. D., Neckerman, H. J., Gest, S., & Gariépy, J-L. (1988). Social networks and aggressive behavior: Peer support or peer rejection? Developmental Psychology, 24, 815-823.
- Friedrich-Cofer, L. (1989) Parental abdication: A problem in search of a policy. Paper read at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development. Kansas City, Missouri (April).
- Sanger, C. (1989) Parental misappropriation of the statutory emancipation procedure. Paper read at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development. Kansas City, Missouri (April).
- Willemsen, E. (1989) The utilization and impact of statutory emancipation. Paper read at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development. Kansas City, Missouri (April).

Table 1
CLS Longitudinal Project through 1988

Cohort I							
Grade	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th
Year	1981-82	1982-83	1983-84	1984-85	1985-86	1986-87	1987-88
N	(220/220)	(199/220)	(194/220)	(192/220)	(199/220)	(209/219)	(214/219)
Recovery	1.00	.90	.88	.87	.90	.95	.98
Cohort II							
Grade		7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th ^a
Year		1982-83	1983-84	1984-85	1985-86	1986-87	1987-88
N		[475/475]	[456/474]	[446/474]	[447/472]	[461/472]	[337/340]
Recovery		1.00	.96	.94	.95	.98	.99

^aCohort II, Squad A data are shown in 12th grade for 1987-88; Cohort II Squad B data for 1987-88 appears in the 11th grade. Squad B recovery rate in 1987-88 was also .99 (131/132).

Table 2
Types of Parental Abdication/Adolescent Emancipation

A. Statutory Emancipation (Age < 18 years)				
Emancipation Action	Females		Males	
	Number	Percent	Number	
Percent				
Marriage	13/362	3.6%	0/328	0.0%
Armed Services	0/362	0.0%	0/328	0.0%
Judicial	0/362	0.0%	0/328	0.0%
B. Functional Emancipation /Abdication (Age < 18 years)				
Living Circumstances	Females		Males	
	Number	Percent	Number	
Percent				
Boy/Girlfriend	10/362	2.8%	3/328	0.9%
Living on Own	5/362	1.4%	6/328	1.8%
Foster Care	2/362	0.6%	4/328	1.2%
Relatives	24/362	6.6%	24/328	7.3%
A. Sum "Statutory"	13/362	3.6%	0/328	0.0%
B. Sum "Functional"	41/362	11.3%	37/328	11.3%
Sum "Emancipated" (A+B)	54/362	14.9%	37/328	11.3%

Table 3
 "Emancipation" and Early School Dropout

Living Circumstances	Females		Males	
	Drop/ Drop+NonDrop	Percent Drop	Drop/ Drop+NonDrop	Percent Drop
Married	9/13	69%	—	—
Boy/Girlfriend	8/10	80%	3/3	100%
Living on Own	3/5	60%	4/6	67%
Foster Care	2/2	100%	2/4	50%
Relatives	9/24	38%	8/24	33%
Sum "Emancipated"	31/54	57%	17/37	46%
Sum Remainder	30/308	10%	44/291	15%
		Females: $\chi^2 (1) = 74.51; p < .001$	Males: $\chi^2 (1) 20.60; p < .001$	

Table 4
 Runaway Behavior: Ideation and Occurrence (CLS Cohort I)

Runaway Occurrence	Females		Males	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Overnight	2/99	2.0%	6/81	7.4%
One week	8/99	8.0%	8/81	9.9%
Extended	4/99	4.0%	1/81	1.2%
Permanent	9/99	9.0%	2/81	2.5%
Sum Occurrence	23/99	23.2%	17/81	20.9%
Runaway Ideation or Occurrence	Females		Males	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
A. Serious Ideation	29/99	29.3%	33/81	40.7%
B. Prior Occurrence	23/99	23.2%	17/81	20.9%
Sum (A + B)	52/99	52.5%	50/81	61.7%